

Introduction

Visual resources within San Luis Obispo County are scenic areas that are important aspects of the quality of life for residents and visitors. Varied topography and relatively intact native vegetation are “signature” backdrops to human activities. Features such as mountain ranges and stands of oaks create natural beauty and a “sense of place” that define the county as a unique, high-quality environment.



Hollister Peak

Spectacular visual resources include vistas of steep mountain ranges, the Pacific Ocean shoreline and landmark volcanic peaks. More common features such as rolling hills, open meadows, riparian corridors, wetland areas, and forested areas are also scenic. Traditional rural development and agriculture also contribute to scenic value. . They present a “working landscape” that maintains rural character.

Visual character is a sensitive resource which the County has a compelling interest to protect, because:

- It helps give a “sense of place” to residents,
- Residents value and take pride in an intact scenic character, and
- A high-quality visual environment enhances tourism, real estate values, and economic growth

Visual resources are easily viewed landscape scenes that are valued for their natural or agricultural features and vegetation, including hills, mountains and rock outcrops.

Visual resources are also defined by the view opportunities that people enjoy from a variety of locations, such as but not limited to:

- **Viewpoints** – parks, plazas, beaches, streets, trails, private property
- **Vista points** – specialized viewing areas near roads and highways
- **Scenic roads and highways** – corridors that provide viewing opportunities

TYPES OF VISUAL RESOURCES

SCENIC LANDMARKS AND VIEWS

Visual resources are often spectacular, steep mountain ranges, the Pacific Ocean shoreline or volcanic peaks. Some outstanding features, such as peaks and coastal views, are so beautiful and dramatic that they have an iconic status as landmarks. These icons of the landscape may be miles long but only visible to the traveling public for a few seconds. Or, like Morro Rock, they may be visible to entire communities. They are especially sensitive to impairment by development. Cooperation and partnerships are essential between land owners, County government and land conservation organizations to conserve and enhance views of these resources.

SCENIC LANDSCAPES

Landscapes such as rolling hills and low ridgelines, open meadows, riparian corridors, wetlands and forested areas provide valued scenery.

Scenic Landscape Regions have signature landscapes that are distinctly different due to combinations of topography, vegetation, and land uses such as agriculture. Views of the steep, grassy hills near Shandon are different from the rolling, wooded hills in the Templeton area. These typical landscapes provide visual definitions of the place in which they occur, which are sensitive to residents and visitors. Their sensitivity to alteration from development is less than that of landmarks and the scenic corridors along major roads and highways. However, guidance is needed to encourage development to fit within these local “vernacular” resources.



Shandon region



Templeton region

Coastal Visual Resources have high value and are protected by the California Coastal Act through the county Coastal Plan Policies and Local Coastal Program.

Community Separators maintain rural identity between communities and distinguish between communities' identities along roads and highways. Development, subdivision and zoning controls should be applied to avoid higher densities and urbanization of these areas.

Scenic Corridors are visible from popular or well-traveled roads or highways, where visual resources are particularly sensitive to impairment by inappropriately designed development. Development, subdivision and zoning controls are applied to locate and design projects well away from roadways and as unobtrusively as possible.

BUILT ENVIRONMENTS

Built environments create a sense of place that contributes to the local identity of San Luis Obispo County. People generally value new urban development that reflects historical traditions. They also seem to favor development that is subordinate to the landscape, instead of dominating it.

- Traditional rural development and agriculture contributes to scenic value and often fits in with the natural landscape. Today they present a “working landscape” that maintains a rural character or image.
- The visual character within communities is also largely defined by the historical layout, pattern and styles of development. Residents value the historical character, scale and densities of their communities. New development should be compatible with these characteristics.

ASSESSING VISUAL RESOURCES

A primary difference between visual resources and other physical resources is that their importance is subjective, depending on cultural values about beauty, character and history. The following terms are key concepts that are commonly used to assess visual resources. The more that landscape scenes are consistent with these concepts (in any combination), the more valued they usually are to the public and therefore sensitive to alteration.

- **Vividness** - The visual impression received from *contrasting* landscape elements as they combine to form a *striking and distinctive* visual pattern
- **Intactness** - The *integrity* of visual order in the *natural and human* built landscape, and the extent to which the natural landscape is free from visual *encroachment*

- **Unity** - The current *internal consistency and harmony* of landscape features that has resulted from past actions, or put another way, the degree to which the visual resources of the landscape *join together* to form a coherent, harmonious visual pattern
- **Visual Access** - The physical conditions under which viewing is possible, in terms of location, breadth and timing of a view. Visual access is also defined by the view opportunities that people enjoy from a variety of locations, such as, but not limited to:
 - ◇ **Viewpoints** – public parks, plazas, beaches, trails, and private property
 - ◇ **Vista points** – specialized viewing areas near roads and highways
 - ◇ **Roads and highways** – corridors that provide viewing opportunities
 - ◇ **Communities** – viewing of landmarks and highly valued landscapes from within communities

Visual Sensitivity

Certain uses are considered more sensitive to visual change than others. The most sensitive to visual change include scenic roadways and view corridors and recreational areas. State and County-designated scenic corridors are considered sensitive because many people use these routes that are identified as areas of outstanding scenic quality. Scenic quality is also important for recreational users enjoying activities such as bicycling, boating, hiking and picnicking.

VISUAL RESOURCE ISSUES

Effects of Development. Adverse changes to the landscape, such as grading, vegetation removal and inappropriate development, may become distracting to the point that they compete for attention with other features in view. They may impair or even block scenic views or make them inaccessible. Development may create low-quality landscapes, where incongruous buildings or grading dominate attention, or it may alter natural patterns to the point of incoherence or disharmony. However, careful attention to siting projects discreetly, using low-profile designs and vegetative screening, can blend development within the landscape.

Effects of Land Management. Decisions are made daily on how to manage activities such as agriculture, mining, forestry, fire prevention, and grading. While the intent of these decisions may be well-founded, their execution may harm visual resources. Activities that are typically not regulated as development can impair the scenic values of a natural, rural landscape.

TYPES OF SCENIC REGULATIONS

Regulation of Development

Regulation of development is one method of implementing policies to protect visual resources (others are land conservation easements and agreements). Several kinds of regulations are used by the County, including the following:

- **The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)** requires that proposed discretionary projects (for which a public hearing is required) be reviewed to identify their potential impacts to visual resources, among others. An initial study of potential impacts is conducted to assess the quality of the visual resources surrounding the proposed project and its potential disruption, intrusion, or contribution to a cumulative reduction of the resource's value. A determination is made whether potentially significant impacts may occur, and mitigation measures are proposed to reduce visual impacts to insignificance, or alternatives to the project are identified if significant impacts cannot be reduced to insignificance with suitable mitigation measures. These measures are considered in the discretionary review of a project, and they may be required as changes to an approved project.
- **Sensitive Resource Areas (SRA)** are highly scenic areas that have been identified as important visual resources, related to communities, rural areas and viewpoints as well as roads and highways. Sensitive Resource Areas are designated in the General Plan and as a zoning overlay by the Board of Supervisors. The overlay zoning includes requirements for new development applications, except non-structural agricultural uses and one single-family dwelling per lot of record, to be designed to protect the existing resources.
- **Highway Corridor Design Standards (HCDS)** are in the County Land Use Ordinance for mapped areas of visual resources along and/or near most of Highway 101. They are regulations that apply requirements for sensitive, low-profile residential development only.
- **Coastal Plan Policies** protect visual and scenic resources within the Coastal Zone. They apply to general development and subdivisions within scenic vistas and sensitive habitats, to protect views to and along the ocean, and to minimize the visibility of development from public view corridors. They also protect the compatibility of development within small-scale neighborhoods and special coastal communities.
- **Land Use Ordinance and Coastal Zone Land Use Ordinance** include standards that apply to setbacks, heights, signage, exterior lighting, undergrounding of on-site utilities, and other common project features. Some areas are addressed by specific ordinance standards that require compatibility with a particular landscape or neighborhood.

- **Community Design Plans** apply within almost all of the unincorporated urban areas or communities, with the exceptions of Los Osos, Creston and Shandon. Design plans include background information, planning goals, and standards and/or guidelines that encourage residential and non-residential development to be compatible with existing development and achieve their goals. Design plans are adopted as part of the Land Use or Coastal Zone Land Use Ordinance and apply as standards.

Guidelines and Standards

The following list includes the kinds of guidelines or standards that should be considered in regulating development to protect visual resources:

Visual Analysis. Preparation of a visual analysis by a licensed architect, a licensed landscape architect or other qualified person should be done to determine the scenic quality and sensitivity of the site to development, and potential issues to be addressed by development.

Site Design. Structures should be sited and designed to take maximum advantage of existing topography and vegetation in order to screen them from public roads and places such as parks or lakes. Proposed structures should be located so that they do not silhouette against the sky on any prominent ridgelines.

Setback. Where possible, residential buildings, residential accessory structures, and agricultural accessory structures should be set back 100 - 300 feet from the edge of the right-of-way of the scenic road. If there is no feasible development area outside of this setback, the project should be located on the rear half of the property and provide a landscaping screen of moderately fast-growing, drought-tolerant plant material to provide 80 percent view coverage at plant maturity at the building site (not along the public road).

Clustering. To the extent feasible, structures should be clustered on each parcel within existing built areas and/or near existing natural features such as tree groupings or the toe of slopes. On hills and ridges, highly visible open areas should be avoided; structures that project above the ridge or silhouette against the sky as viewed from public roads should be avoided; and driveways should be substantially screened from view where practical.

Grading. Grading, cuts, fills and development should be avoided on hills and ridges that are visible from public roads or places, or minimized where avoidance is not possible. Where feasible, contours of the finished surface should blend with adjacent natural terrain to achieve a consistent grade and natural appearance.

Tree Preservation. Building sites and roadways should be sited to preserve significant existing tree stands and significant oak trees. The removal of trees and other mature vegetation for development or fire protection purposes should be avoided, or minimized where avoidance is

not possible,. Special care should be given to avoid the removal of large “specimen” trees, tree groupings, and windbreaks that add historical character.

Landscaping. Development projects should use natural landforms and vegetation to screen development. Where that cannot be done, it is preferred to screen development with native vegetation that is compatible with the scenic resource being protected and which does not obstruct public vistas. A landscaping plan should be prepared by a licensed architect, licensed landscape architect, or other qualified person. Landscape screening should exist or be planted so that there will be at least 50 percent screening at plant maturity, continuing for the life of structures that are visible from Highway One. The landscape screening should consist of native or low water-using vegetation (no invasive species) that is fire resistant. Screening or backdrop vegetation should be located and planted in conformance with CDF requirements for fire safety. The landscape screening should maximize use of evergreen trees and large-growing shrubs that have shapes similar to existing vegetation. At least 50 percent of the plant materials should consist of fast-growing species that will provide a landscape screen while the slower-growing species mature. The required landscape screening should be reasonably maintained for the life of the structure.

Structure design. Minimize building height and mass by using low-profile design that may include partially sinking structures below grade. Minimize the visibility of structures by using colors that blend with colors of the surrounding environment. When structures silhouette against the sky on prominent ridgelines as viewed from scenic roads, include hip roofs with a pitch that causes the building to appear to recede from public view.

Building exterior. Building exteriors should use non-reflective materials. Exterior siding should be stucco, masonry, brick, wood or wood-appearing materials, or other natural appearing materials. Other siding materials may be used if they are found to be in harmony with the surrounding natural environment.

Colors. Use colors that are taken from and that blend with the natural landscape. (OSP25a4)

Utilities. Minimize the visibility of utilities from public view corridors and the County should require that utilities are placed underground where feasible.

Signs. New development projects should minimize signs, especially freestanding signs, and locate them so they do not interfere with vistas from scenic corridors. The County should secure removal of non-conforming signs within scenic corridors as part of the review of discretionary development projects wherever feasible. Information and direction signs should be designed to be simple, easy-to-read and harmonize with surrounding elements.

Open space preservation. To protect significant visual resources, open space preservation is a compatible measure to support the approval of new development. Within a critical viewshed or SRA (for visual protection), land divisions, Minor Use Permits or Development Plans (excluding any agricultural accessory building) should include an agreement with the county to maintain in open space use those scenic portions of the site within the Critical Viewshed or SRA (for visual protection) that are not intended for development. Guarantee of open space preservation may be in the form of public purchase, agreements, easements controls or other appropriate instrument, provided that such guarantee agreements are not to grant public access unless acceptable to the property owner.

ROADWAY DESIGN

County and State road and highway development projects can greatly affect the visual quality on and near scenic roadways. Scenic Corridor studies and designations should guide all County and State road and highway development projects. In the absence of a designated Scenic Corridor, the following interim guidelines should apply to projects on any of the candidate Scenic Corridor roadways.

- 1) **Road Alignment.** Design and alignment of a Scenic Corridor roadway should include preservation and enhancement of scenic resources, as well as considerations of safety and capacity.
- 2) **Environmental Review.** Where standard roadway design or roadway realignment would significantly degrade a scenic feature or preclude visual access to a scenic feature, design alternatives should be considered through preparation of an environmental impact report.



*Scenic corridor -
2008 Highway 101 design*

- 3) **Character Defining Features.** Design characteristics such as curves, changes of direction and topography that provide identity to individual Scenic Corridors should be preserved to the maximum extent feasible.
- 4) **Grading.** Grading for new cuts or fills should avoid significant impacts to scenic resources if possible or be minimized. Angular cuts and fills should be avoided to the maximum extent feasible. All grading should be contoured to match with the surrounding terrain. Maximum effort should be made to balance cut and fill on-site.

5) Planting / Landscaping.

- a. The County or applicable public agency should use extensive California native and/or drought tolerant landscaping to screen existing public facilities within scenic corridors. (OSP25 Implementation no. 3)
- b. Fire-resistant native plants and trees should be utilized in any roadside landscaping along Scenic Corridor roadways.
- c. Where previous plant material has been washed away or destroyed (due to excessive rainfall, fire, grading, etc.) erosion-controlling plants should be planted to prevent erosion and mud/land slides, and hillsides and slopes should either be hydro-seeded or terraced and then planted with native fire-resistant plants.
- d. Outstanding specimens of existing trees and plants located within the public right-of-way of a Scenic Corridor should be retained to the maximum extent feasible within the same public right-of-way.
- e. Low-growing ground cover and/or shrubs should be utilized as parkway planting along Scenic Corridors in order to avoid blocking a desirable view of a scenic feature. Plant material size at maturity, as well as overall scale of plants within the landscaped area, should be carefully studied during site analysis and design.

6) Signs. The only signs that should be permitted within the public right-of-way of a Scenic Corridor or on private property near it are traffic, informational, and identification signs.

- a. Off-site outdoor advertising is prohibited in the public right-of-way of, and on publicly-owned land within five hundred feet of the center line of, a Scenic Highway.
- b. Discretionary land use approvals involving parcels zoned for non-residential use located within five hundred feet of the center line of a Scenic Highway should comply with the sign requirements of the Commercial Retail land use category.
- c. Designated Scenic Highways should have first priority for removal of nonconforming billboards or signs. Such priority extends to properties located along, or within five hundred feet of the center line of, designated Scenic Highways.

7) Public Utilities. To the maximum extent feasible, all new or relocated electric, communication, and other public utility distribution facilities within five hundred feet of the center line of a Scenic Highway should be placed underground. Where undergrounding of such utilities is not feasible, all such new or relocated utilities should be screened to minimize their visibility from a Scenic Highway.